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Seeing things by Anna Margolin

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SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kobieca poezja jidysz XX wieku, liryki Anny Margolin (Róży Lebensbojm), neoklasycyzm, akmeizm, Dinggedicht

Anna Margolin is the stage name of Róża Lebensbojm¹, a poet, born in Brisk (Brest-Litovsk) in 1887, who died in New York in 1952. What we know about her life is rudimentary and it comes down to a few important artistic breakthroughs, developed and discussed by Shirley Kumove², a researcher who, on the basis of reminiscences of the poet, gathered an impressive document of Margolin's life. So she grew up in Brest, attended schools, and in 1906, she went to New York to start studying. Even these preliminary biographical remarks indicate her status – exceptional, specific on the background of the situation of women in Eastern Europe, who could not dream of education, not to mention continuing studies at foreign universities. She grew up in the spirit of enlightened Jewish community. She was a polyglot, erudite, an emancipated woman, financially independent. She had her debut like a significant part of the environment of women writing in Yiddish and Polish in the twenties, but in New York. Contrary to expectations, enthusiastic reviews all of the press in Warsaw she did not reach readership success. By that time, she had had travelled to the greatest capitals of the world, discovered civil liberties, especially the independence resulting from life of artistic bohemia. She created her biography on the model of accursed poets: nineteenth-century French Symbolists and Else Lasker-Schuler, a poet of German modernism, who wrote in Yiddish. Before she published her poems, she wrote a women's column in the

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¹ A. Margolin, [in:] *Antologia poezji żydowskiej*, selection, notes and footnotes A. Łastik, edit. and preface by A. Słucki, Warszawa 1983, p. 130.

² S. Kumove, *Introduction: the poetry of Anna Margolin* [in:] *Drunk from the Bitter Truth. The poems of Anna Margolin*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Shirley Kumove, New York 2005, pp. XIII-XXI.

Jewish magazine „Der Tog”. Thanks to Margolin’s efforts *The Yiddish Poem in America*, anthology, which included works by Jewish poets was developed and published in the US, even before her debut in 1923. Celia Dropkin was the only woman chosen by Margolin, spiritually close to her. She made the selection therefore consciously, developing the map of literary fascination, being a follower of the read and studied artists, for some reason important to her. Perhaps surprisingly, being aware of her linguistic, cultural, and biographical separateness, she did not deny what is durable and repeatable in culture – themes, ideas. In the plan of meanings, she found perpetuated by the tradition formal solutions, which were used for controlling a too loud voice, toning it as a result of objectification.

Margolin’s poetry is a clear return towards neoclassicism, accumulating topics, thesis hints, and ideas taken from artists ideologically close to her: Anna Akhmatova (from whom she took her name³), Osip Mandelstam, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ezra Pound⁴. Although it is difficult to speak of a uniform field of the impact of specific works, those mental pictures are important for Margolin that are of clear austerity, the resignation of a conceptual nebula, rejecting reality, the word is to adhere to things. This is an interpretation of Acmeism, a school of poetry that grew on Russian soil around 1910, of which ideological thesis appeared i.e. in „Apollon”, the program magazine of this group. The name of this magazine was not accidental. It pointed to Acmeists’ patron, the god of antiquity, associated with condensed, symbolic speech. These were the scaffolding of Margolin’s artistic program. In the thinking on the construction, she did not stop on those findings. This language is objectified, which dictates that if you have to look into yourself, you must not obscure the world yourself. You must enter the area of life, but specific life, through experience – not conceptually distorted. This category of view, which later in the development of Polish poetry another poet would call „the study of the subject”, Margolin borrowed from Rilke’s poems, called *Dinggedicht*, “poems about things”. Thus, she determined relation to reality, consisting of “trying to penetrate into the described and – through verbal equivalent – the existence of its existence”⁵. The author of *Poems* did not stop these creative explorations on these diagnoses. She approached the imagism, giving her art a visual dimension, operating with an acronym, a snapshot look, in which the main contents, their condensation exist.

³ The pseudonym became a part of her when she started using it in 1929, the moment she published her first poetry book. See: *Drunk from the Bitter Truth. The poems of Anna Margolin*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Shirley Kumove, New York 2005, p. XV; B. Mann, *Picturing the Poetry of Anna Margolin*, p. 512, http://www.barbaramann.org/uploads/2/9/0/2/29028941/mann_picturingpoetryannamargolin_501-536.pdf [access: 2015.01.23]. Acmeism.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 502, 504.

⁵ K. Kuczyńska-Koschany, „*Musisz swoje życie zmienić*”, czyli o Rilke Barańczaka, „Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne”, Poznań 1999, p. 100.

There is not, however, the end of this review of the comments on art, its rules and interpretation. For Margolin visual poetry was important, which imposes discipline on the artist in the choice of words and images, the density of meanings and concretization of experience resulting in an intuitive glimpse. As Barbara Mann⁶ demonstrated Margolin was heavily influenced by many, often differing, views on writing: art that emphasizes imagery, releasing the artist from the corset of intellectualized speech, and further the search for ways to reach the existence of things, and the vision distant from the rest to describe a whole: reflected in the essence of her own soul.

The powers of the artist must combine orders, even resulting in such a distance from each other, as described herein modernist and neo-classical beings. Margolin questions the uniformity of style, speaks many languages, in a sense competes with herself, a poet of eye and heart. Of course, this distinction has nothing to do with romantic staffage. The artist is in fact aware of the existence of two separate categories in the poem, which she does not try to distinguish in any way. She wants to melt these two areas of otherness into one, though doubt is growing in her whether the structure will emerge out of these internal cracks, through which she will manage to accommodate the identity dilemma that is taking place in herself. She tries almost everything in the art of seeing: expression and omissions, fusing the intensity of feelings and objectifying reality. What would the role of the artists be in this case? What would be their status? They would shape the reality, rule it, but also care about saving the dramatic power that is a part of the reality, obliterating which would mean to miss the chance to feel fully. The nature of imaging is to reflect the volatility of the world, mixing conceptual categories. The poet, as Margolin sees, must set measures of all kinds, from the aesthetic to the ethical and epistemological⁷.

The poet does not escape into the exoticism, of course, prevails over the words, distributes accents of meaning, and keeps the balance of the world, expressed in the tension between good and evil, joy and despair – „goblets of poison, goblets of joy”. The whole of creation, which came from the hands of the artist, feels an all-encompassing vision of the demiurge, is less preoccupied with the question about the logic of history. It is forged from the words, so it undergoes therefore this action, to some a vague, but still being sensed, harmony. Repetition of the creative gesture, rather than transforming the old into the new, uplifting the entire cosmos with its weight, from the beginning seems an extraordinary effort, but impossible to achieve? The poet is weighed down by the curse of taking responsibility for the entire creative act, faults too, not to protect themselves behind a row of serial courtiers, facing the blows and criticism.

⁶ B. Mann, *Picturing the Poetry of Anna Margolin*, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

⁷ A. Margolin, *The proud song* [in:] *Drunk from the Bitter Truth. The poems of Anna Margolin*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Shirley Kumove, New York 2005, p. 163.

Margolin does not diminish this poetic power, nay, she emphasizes its momentous – the sacred rank. The artist performs solemn service, with due reverence of the ceremony, observing rituals, pathos and dignity closed in a gesture of hands lifting the goblet up, as a sign of offering to the world the sweet and bitter forms of existence. Is horror of what the artist creates, what brings to life, what sanctifies, growing in the poet? Does he or she see like a person looking from a distance at this spectacle, with every moment clearer contrast between white and majesty, and therefore between the pure beauty and austerity of expression and the collapse of the form, smashing it? What was left from the atmosphere being built on the foundation of faith? The artist sits on the “broken chair” and holds in their hands the idea acquired from the biggest: the pride of poetry, taking to the heights of human affairs. Is it the culmination of creative power? Will it ensure the long duration of the artist? Struggling with the broken form, embarrassed by disintegrating formula of devout worship, the poet wants to call the world from the beginning, and manages to, in a sense. We can see in it the momentum of the royal power, and close collapse. Does the name, invented before the birth of sin, to determine the world in its infancy, emerging only, not hurt the twentieth-century “Queen of words”? Is “harmony” really a concept equally established and understood? Instead covering up the discrepancy, bringing out a layer of covering traces of tremors on the royal painting, in this self-portrait composed, Margolin sharpens these details. She does not outweigh the elements that established her sensitivity, as if she wanted to be remembered thanks to the image of the queen falling apart at the foundations, retaining huge distance to the work created with such a love of detail.

Margolin’s art with enclosed horizons of visual poetry initiates into the process of looking at the world, everything that is important, at the sight of which voice does not break, but flows like the living stream. You must look so long at the engraving by Botticelli, to see beyond the absolute beauty expressed in femininity, the perfection of supreme performance of delicate, ethereal matter⁸.

These are not only the exercises of vision. Analyzing the workshop of the builder of Renaissance in detail (lines, grooves, and contours) offered a sense of rootedness in a common for the creator and recipient space of the disorder, from which a thickened picture of meanings emerges suddenly. It seems to be masterpiece, inimitable perfectness of wielding the stylus. In the Botticelli’s technique of creating your eye sees something immaterial texture, something that is so close, palpable, and which exceeds the colloquial imagery, is dreamy, ethereal. Is it possible to perceive that? Margolin looks at this world layout made with strong and barely visible line as if from the outside. She maps the landscape of autumn sinking in the shadows, and sketches, as once Botticelli

⁸ A. Margolin, *Girls in Crotona Park*, [in:] *Drunk from the Bitter Truth. The poems of Anna Margolin*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Shirley Kumove, New York 2005, p. 151.

on copperplate, a scene presenting girls who go into ecstasies over beauty that does not fade, because it was born after a spiritual oneness of bodily and spiritual beauty. Years ago, the artist found the right balance to present it, the right color – lavender mixed with „dried-pink” and filling with soft material the traces of the cutting stylus. Margolin looks for reasonable artistic parallels for their discoveries in the Renaissance technique of making a copperplate. And she finds them. She combines old traditions and the latest creation, illuminating them in a refreshing movement of an idea. She talks about beauty that frees from the dark vision. I quote in full the two poems of the same title – **Autumn**⁹.

And the second work, which came to the anthology of Margolin’s poetry, developed by Shirley Kumove¹⁰.

Margolin knows autumnal soul well. It is a reflection of the ground frozen in the most intensive period of growth, extinct life energy, which stops in place. „Heavy steps”, „dark hearts”, desperate wail, loss of faith in the victory of life over death are signs of passing, getting in the background. The poet compares this state to petrifying of which manifestations are, mentioned in both poems, traces of natural death, of light dying over the city, which casts only ash glow on the hand holding her and the lyrical subject’s happiness and suffering. It would be naive to think that, as “a naked branch” will bloom one day, from the tormented soul a lily will grow and the heart anguished by concerns will brighten clean look. The convention of a monologue spoken in both poems is a validation of that inner voice that is able to digest despair, grab clarity of vision.

Rigor of artistry dominates in Margolin’s poetry, under which the person describing the world must stand out of the depicted reality. The thing that emerges from the excess of swirling sensations and thoughts, subjective inconsistent feelings is out of focus. It only requires discipline not to go beyond the frames of the picture of exterior. Hence before she tells about the spiritual crisis in which she is herself, about a sense of loss and dejection, this confession will be preceded by scenes of one of the streets of New York. The time, which is mentioned here, is not accidental. As you know, the cruelest month is April¹¹.

You can hear echoes of Elliot’s *Waste Land*, the poem containing a pessimistic diagnosis of dying of ideas, on which people built cultural foundations of thought saving any subjectivity of every poorest creature, every tiny nation, ethnic group, tribe. The identity of the world is threatened. April, so far having been associated with the growth, vitality dormant in nature, is the symbol of the reversal of the order of nature

⁹ A. Margolin, Autumn, [in:] *Drunk from the Bitter Truth. The poems of Anna Margolin*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Shirley Kumove, New York 2005, p. 125.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

and the disturbance of the course of history. Margolin reaches topoi of melancholy: stroke of a bell, “fiery arms”, “ebbing day”, “black processions of cars”, black sun. She uses the standard of Eliot’s writing. She draws a big city landscape, interwoven with sadness, ominous blackness enveloping the entire space of the city.

Margolin wants to rise above what in poetry she called life – more than poignant feeling of “otherness”. She will write in a settlement tone¹².

In the last chord of life, in *Epitaph*, she wanted to be remembered in this way, as the guardian of fire, poetic fervor, courageous vision, throughout her life poetizing the waste land of her literary research – cursed fate of the artist, that of momentary elations.

Margolin’s poetry emerged from the contact of two opposing traditions – striving to explore the outside world, being in the power of clear and precise phrase, so thought out that it would move away from itself, from conceptually smear formula, little saying “the image of the soul”. However, deviation from these assumptions comes with the moment when the poet reaches for the themes that expand the scale of her feeling of existence, meant with loneliness, transience, decay of identity, issues most difficult to express. And then is it worth caring of the rest, i.e. the composition, distribution of accents, the poetic word? Margolin does not allege thinking about modeling and organization of artistic space, even if she does not come close to express the essence of being, she resumes the search for traces, which her masters of the art of seeing, economical phrasing, heightened vision followed, the ones who dosed line by line the reality of “seven measures of pain”.

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¹² *Ibidem*, p. 109.

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ABSTRACT

If we recall the most important words for the poetry, we should begin the story with the stones, lily, hands and blood, which, if you look at them with the philological accuracy, are interrelated: situate themselves clearly on opposite banks of the creative process. They talk about the construction of the building consisting of perceptions about their own strength and weakness, ecstasy and congealing in what for centuries the classics poets have tried to fathom: the harmony and clarity, driven by the hope that in life they should above all stick to be beauty. And in addition, they ought to go further than discipline, practice eye and expand the field of view, should not shun from the gusts of the heart, because the heart grows more powerful due to great ideas, passions. Spacious becomes the vision of writing, it is the weave of contradictions – this is how one of the most important twentieth-century poets, who wrote in Yiddish, Anna Margolin sees it. Margolin's poetry is a clear return towards neo-classicism, building up topics, theses, allusions, ideas taken from ideologically close to her artists of great individuality, Anna Akhmatova (from whom she took her name), Osip Mandelstam, Rainer Maria Rilke, Ezra Pound.

Widzenia rzeczy Anny Margolin

STRESZCZENIE

Jeśli przywołać najważniejsze dla tej poezji słowa, należałoby rozpocząć opowieść od kamieni, lilii, dłoni i krwi, które, jeśli przyjrzeć się im z filologiczną dokładnością, są wzajemnie powiązane: sytuują się wyraźnie na przeciwległych brzegach procesu twórczego. Mówią o wznoszeniu gmachu złożonego z wyobrażeń o sile i słabości swej, upojeniu i zastyganiu w tym, co od wieków poeci klasycy próbowali zgłębić: harmonię i jasność, wiedzeni nadzieją, że w życiu ponad wszystko trzymać się należy piękna. A ponadto w dyscyplinie nie poprzestawać, ćwiczyć oko i poszerzać pole widzenia, od porywów serca nie stronić; serce bowiem rośnie, potężnieje od wielkich idei, namiętności. Pojemna się staje ta wizja pisania, jest spłotem sprzeczności- tak ją widzi jedna z najważniejszych poetek dwudziestowiecznych, pisząca w jidysz, Anna Margolin. Poezja Margolin jest wyraźnym zwrotem w stronę neoklasycyzmu, nawarstwianiem wątków, tez, aluzji, myśli przejętych od światopoglądowo jej bliskich artystów, wielkich indywidualności: Anny Achmatowej (od której przejęła imię), Osipa Mandelsztama, Rainera Marii Rilkego, Ezra Pounda.